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Canterbury and Rome to Merge? As if the Anglican Communion Needed Another Controversy

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Ruth Gledhill of *The Times* [London] is out with a bombshell in this morning's edition of the paper. If the report had been published in a paper less respected than *The Times*, we might have reason to doubt it. Gledhill reports that "senior bishops" of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church are ready to support a proposal for union under the Pope.

From her report:

Radical proposals to reunite Anglicans with the Roman Catholic Church under the leadership of the Pope are to be published this year; The Times has learnt.

The proposals have been agreed by senior bishops of both churches. In a 42-page statement prepared by an international commission of both churches, Anglicans and Roman Catholics are urged to explore how they might reunite under the Pope.

The statement, leaked to The Times, is being considered by the Vatican, where Catholic bishops are preparing a formal response.

Meanwhile, the Anglican primates meeting in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in an emergency session to avoid schism in the church, have seemingly failed to come up with a way to resolve the controversy over homosexuality and biblical authority. Thus far, seven of the primates have twice refused to participate in communion with, among others, Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church USA.

Gledhill helpfully notes that the Dar es Salaam meeting is caused by disagreement over the "fundamentals of Christian doctrine." She also noted that "the Church's credibility is being increasingly undermined in a world that is looking for strong witness from its international religious leaders."

Here is more:

The latest Anglican-Catholic report could hardly come at a more sensitive time. It has been drawn up by the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission, which is chaired by the Right Rev David Beetge, an Anglican bishop from South Africa, and the Most Rev John Bathersby, the Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane, Australia.

The commission was set up in 2000 by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey of Clifton, and Cardinal Edward Cassidy, then head of the Vatican's Council for Christian Unity. Its aim was to find a way of moving towards unity through "common life and mission".

The document leaked to The Times is the commission's first statement, Growing Together in Unity and Mission. The report acknowledges the "imperfect communion" between the two churches but says that there is enough common ground to make its "call for action" about the Pope and other issues.

Really? This strange development raises far more questions than it answers. The more liberal wing of the Church of England could certainly find much common ground with the Roman Catholic Church on issues of social justice, ecology, and peacemaking, for example. On the other hand, what would the liberal Anglicans think about joining a church that denies the ordination of women and steadfastly opposes the normalization of homosexual behavior? This makes no sense.

The more conservative wing of the church finds itself in the opposite position — agreeing with the Roman Catholic Church on many of its most controversial social and moral teachings, but hardly in agreement on other grounds of concern.

The Anglo-Catholics, long favoring a more Roman Catholic form of Anglicanism, will likely find themselves encouraged by the proposal. The Evangelical wing will surely be steadfastly opposed.

The Church of England emerged, after all, because of King Henry VIII's break with the papacy in the 16th century. Now, this report suggests a veritable bombshell:

"We urge Anglicans and Roman Catholics to explore together how the ministry of the Bishop of Rome might be offered and received in order to assist our Communion to grow towards full, ecclesial communion."

Remember now that the original form of the [Articles of Religion](#) (often known as the "Thirty-Nine Articles") contained this memorable and transparent line: "The Bishop of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this Realm of England."

The Church of England's doctrinal differences with the Roman Catholic Church are historic and theologically significant — at least as represented by its own confessional statement. Some of the most significant theological contributions of the Reformation came from the pens and ministries of those associated with the Church of England. Do the names Cranmer, Ridley, and Latimer — all martyred for the faith of the Reformation — not suffice to make this point? Add to these the names of the Puritans and others who continued that Reformation tradition.

This report is but another indication of the theological confusion that now vexes and threatens the Anglican Communion. Would the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, suggest that Anglican bishops could have a close communion with Rome — even unified under the papacy — when they cannot share communion with each other in Dar es Salaam?

Pray for this church, and stay tuned. The news out of Dar es Salaam is likely to be very important this coming week.

